

# Quality of Citizens

## Lecture 5

# What if your country has bad citizens?

- Democratic quality as citizen rule
- Two ways that it can fail
  - Elites ignore citizens
  - Citizens rule badly
- Most study of democratic quality focuses on first possibility, not second

# 1. Democratic quality & citizen quality

# Elite orientation of quality of democracy research

- Field born out of sense that politicians rule badly – corrupt, self-interested
- Munck's survey shows five aspects of quality common in extant accounts
  - Only one focuses on citizens – elections and voting
- Besides voter turnout little attention to citizens

# Suspicion of citizens common in classic political theory

- Plato
- Hobbes
- Elite theorists: Michels, Mosca, Pareto
- Marx and Gramsci
- Even Mill and Tocqueville worry about tyranny of majority

# Recent wave of doubts about citizens

- Trump
- Brexit
- Le Pen



# Ideal types

**Informed,  
rational  
citizens**

**Uninformed,  
irrational  
citizens**

**Responsive  
politicians**

Ideal  
democracy

Populism

**Unresponsive  
politicians**

Unjustified  
autocracy

Enlightened  
dictatorship or  
kleptocrat

# Civic virtue

- But also long tradition of thinking about civic virtue
- Civic virtue = disposition and ability to promote common good over private ends
- What characteristics comprise civic virtue?

# Almond & Verba, Civic Culture

- Parochial culture: little awareness of government and little involvement in politics
- Subject culture: aware of government but are not active participants
- Participant culture: citizens are both aware and active
- A&V argue that mix of subject & participant best – need allegiance to system & not too much activism

# From Allegiant to Assertive Culture

- Dalton & Welzel
- Citizens have turned from allegiance to a more “assertive” posture to politics
  - More distrustful of politicians & institutions
  - More ready to confront elites with demands
- More assertive societies perform better
  - More accountable and effective governance.

2. What are high quality citizens?

# Characteristics of high quality citizens?

- Informed – factual knowledge
- Unbiased – not systematically misinformed
- Rational – Bayesian belief formation
- Tolerant – accept social diversity
- Participatory – engage in political action
- Deliberative – engage in political debate

# Knowledge

- Citizens should understand main actors, institutions, and issues in politics in order to vote and participate well
- Debate about how much and what sort of knowledge necessary
- Most studies find relatively low levels of factual knowledge

# Unbiasedness

- Are citizens uninformed or misinformed?
- Citizens shouldn't hold false beliefs about political issues
- Problems of motivated reasoning, conspiracy theories, false beliefs about vaccines, etc.
- Is this too much to expect?
  - Very hard to change incorrect beliefs even if shown correct information

# Rationality

- “Policy preferences are real, generally stable, form coherent patterns, and changes are sensible adjustments to new conditions and new information”
- Good citizens as good Bayesians
  - *When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?*
- Some evidence that public opinion mostly stable, but coherence less clear

# Tolerance

- Citizens should recognize fact of social diversity and not engage in discrimination based on ascriptive traits
- Helps avoid the problem of xenophobia and racist governments that have democratic support

# Participatory

- Good citizens should participate in politics
  - Voting to make sure all interests taken seriously
  - Protests, petitions, etc. to keep politicians responsive between elections
  - Voluntary organizations to help government work more effectively
- But biases
  - Extreme views overrepresented in these ways
  - What if citizens uninformed, misinformed?

# Deliberative

- Good citizens should engage in political debate as equals, state public reasons for their views, and respond to arguments of others
  - Requires exposure to information and tolerance
- Fishkin finds that engaging in deliberation changes and improves beliefs
- Does it ask too much of citizens?
- How to set up proper conditions for deliberation

# How do they go together?

- Are they equally important or some more than others?
- Complementarities
  - Knowledge connected with tolerance, interest in politics, participation, stable opinions
- Tradeoffs
  - Tradeoff between participation and deliberation
  - Weak relationship between knowledge and misperceptions – very informed citizens also often misinformed

# Hot and Cool Citizenship?

Hot Citizenship	Cool Citizenship
Informed	Unbiased
Stable & coherent ideology	Tolerant
Participatory	Deliberative

# Worries

- Hot citizenship is standard path to political success – highly motivated, committed supporters of a cause
  - But also closed off to alternative POVs => leading to misinformation, lack of deliberation, and possibly even intolerance
- Cool citizenship seems preferable
  - But are these people committed enough to win political battles?

# Measuring aspects of citizen quality using WVS, CSES

Information      Interest in politics; political knowledge questions; education

Unbiasedness      Belief in science? Information sources?  
Conspiracy beliefs?

Rationality      Measures of stability of opinion (cf., Page and Shapiro)

Tolerance      Most people can be trusted; People who would like not to have as neighbors

Participatory      Voting turnout; political action – protest, boycott, petition; membership in voluntary associations

Deliberative      Talk with friends and colleagues about politics; information sources; openmindedness

# 4. Conclusions

# Where should we advocate responsive politicians?

- Worries about responsive politicians if citizens are uninformed, misinformed, irrational, intolerant
- In these cases maybe retreat to a more minimal democracy of free elections and horizontal accountability

# But citizen quality not static

- Citizens are endogenous – dynamic factors
- How to improve citizen quality?
  - Civic education and general education
  - Economic prosperity => high SES => tolerance, participation, etc.
  - Agenda setting – responsibilities of politicians not to engage in populism, xenophobia, etc.
  - Media behavior to avoid misperceptions – no space for extremists, don't repeat false claims, etc.

# Questions

- Are these 6 characteristics the correct ones?
- Measurement of citizen quality
- Does citizen quality lead to better outcomes?
- Where does citizen quality come from?